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# Love of Nature

Marguerite Z. Ratliff

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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## **Love of Nature**

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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December, 2006

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### *Artistic Expression*

I stand in awe of nature's beauty. The natural forms and colors of my subjects inspire me to create paintings and three-dimensional clay pieces. As I marvel at God's handiwork, my soul is enriched by the pure sight of His canvas. The rich bright colors of the organic shapes compel me to visually interpret what I experience as an expression of who and what I am, and what I want others to see. My intent is to focus on the elements of the subject matter where the color, shape, and form dominate the space.

## Love of Nature

### Introduction – From the Start

Art has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. As a child, I frequently visited the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia. At the tender and impressionable age of ten years, I marveled at the works of art as I walked through its corridors and rooms. I looked forward to each visit where I could be up close and personal with a multitude of original works of art.

Art classes throughout my junior high and high school experiences strengthened my desire to pursue art in college. My undergraduate work prepared me to bring my talent and appreciation of art into the classroom. The more I teach, the more I learn. Now, I lose all track of time as I wander through museum and gallery exhibits inspecting the brushwork of paintings and the construction methods and glazes of ceramic pieces.



Figure 1. *Shell Vase*, clay, 7.5"x7"x7", 2005.

The off-campus graduate art program offered by Virginia Commonwealth University allowed me to continue my education and obtain a Master of Interdisciplinary

Studies (MIS) degree. Painting and ceramics were my chosen disciplines.

### **Aesthetics - Bold and Beautiful**

Nature in all its beauty calls and inspires me to create works of art that reflect my interpretation of organic shapes and forms. Growing up in the Ocean View area of Norfolk, Virginia, I spent much time at the beach, which developed into a love and desire to be near the water. From the gentle waters of the bay to the rough surf of the ocean,



Figure 2. *Shell Fountain 1*, clay, 14"x9"x5.5", 2005.

seashells of all shapes and sizes, sea glass, and rippled sand under shallow waters have been my inspiration for many clay pieces. *Shell Vase* (Figure 1) embraces the texture of the rough dry sand, the smooth surface of seashells, and the naturally carved ridges of sand along the shore. This treatment of surface enhances the clay to imitate the water's shore. These same surface treatments were used to make *Shell Fountain 1* (Figure 2).

Running water over the clay surface gives the piece a calming effect and draws

attention to the subtle beauty of the water's edge. The sound of water trickling down the sculpted clay and into the pool below awakens the sense of hearing. As the water travels

over the carved clay surface and shells, the ears are attuned to the sound of running water and that can be mesmerizing to the soul. The viewer can now experience the clay fountain, not only by sight and touch but also by sound.

Through my childhood, countless visits to Azalea Gardens in Norfolk, Virginia exposed me to a variety of flowers and foliage on land and in water. The large untamed gardens of overgrown blooming azaleas and wittingly placed annual and perennial flowers captivated me. The radiant colors and stunning foliage inspired much of my two-dimensional work. As I focused on these elements, the subject itself became less



Figure 3. *Water Lilies*, oil paint sticks on paper, 25.5"x40.25", 2006.

important and the color, shape, and form dominated the space. In *Water Lilies* (Figure 3) I tried to capture nature's beauty atop the peaceful and still waters of Lake Whitehurst.



There is a dramatic contrast between the brilliant colors of the petals and the large dark green leaves floating on top of the murky water. The bright yellow-orange center of the flowers seem to advance, while the leaves appear grounded on top of the water's dark surface.

I have a deep appreciation and love of nature and its creator. The vibrant colors and beautiful forms draw me in and inspire me to create my visual interpretations. It is my intention to inspire this appreciation in my audience. Acrylics, oil paint sticks, and clay allow me to emphasize the color, surface, and texture of the natural forms that I use throughout my work.

### **Artists' Influences**

The styles of many artists have influenced my work, from Post Impressionist artists Vincent van Gogh (1853-90) and Paul Cezanne (1839-1906), to the expressive abstractions of artist Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), to Modernist artists Frank Stella

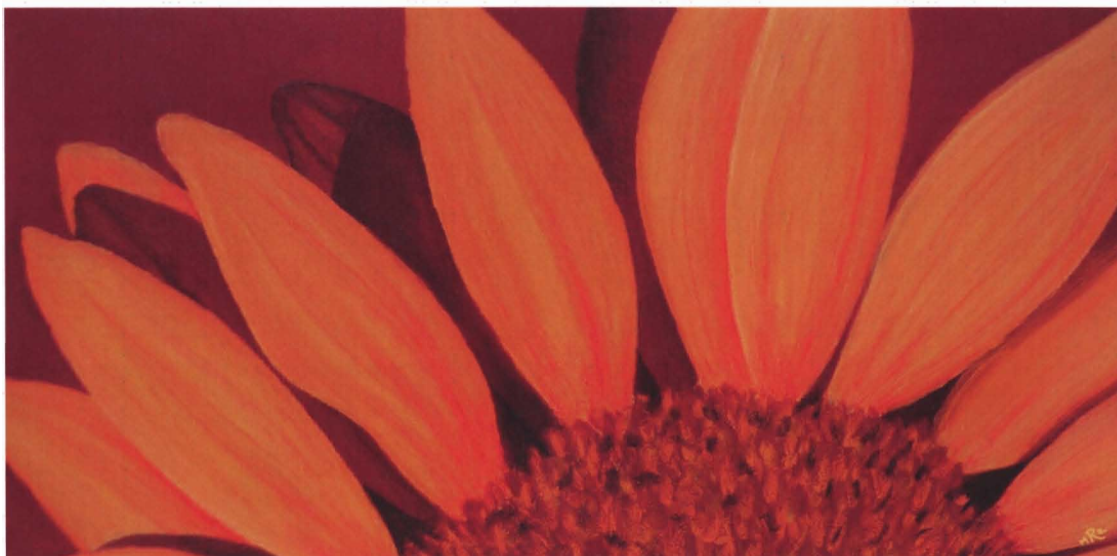


Figure 4. *Sunflower*, oil paint sticks on canvas, 21.25"x44", 2005.



(1936-) and Stuart Davis (1892-1964). The common elements of these influences result from the artists' handling of color, shape, and form of natural objects.

Vincent van Gogh used color as a symbol and varied brushstrokes to depict an array of subject matter. *Sunflowers* (1875), by van Gogh, exemplifies his application of long and short brushstrokes to thickly cover the entire canvas. I used a monochromatic color scheme for *Sunflower* (Figure 4) to denote the warmth of the sun as it casts shadows on the large, overlapping petals. Long strokes of paint were used to build the form of the petals, while short applications of paint were useful to fabricate the textured center of this massive flower.



Figure 5. *Cherry Blossoms*, acrylic on canvas, 32"x40", 2000.

Paul Cezanne used expressive color, and while never losing sight of his subject

matter, pushed his work towards abstraction. He used different tools and techniques to apply paint to the canvas. *Cherry Blossoms* (Figure 5) demonstrates how I, like Cezanne, used long smooth brushstrokes of paint on the branches and a palette knife to apply heavy, short strokes of paint for the blooming foliage of the tree. By using a palette



Figure 6. *Blue Lily*, acrylic on canvas, 24"x18", 1999.

knife, I was able to resist my temptation to tightly blend the blossoms' colors. Instead, I used broken color, layering different colors of unblended paint, to depict the cherry blossoms and build surface depth.

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) produced stylized, almost abstract, images using fluid brushstrokes and intensity of color. She conceptually depicted her forms from nature, such as close-up

views of flowers or flower parts. My painting *Blue Lily* (Figure 6) is a large, cropped view of a flower's center. Long, fluid brushstrokes define the blue petals as they

extend beyond the edge of the canvas. The gentle curves and loops of the interior serves as the focal point, pulling the viewer's eye back to the center of the flower.

In my quest to simplify my subjects, artists such as Frank Stella, with his use of hard edges in his paintings, and Stuart Davis, with his overstated, bigger-than-life imagery and his use of vivid colors, were the inspiration for my most recent paintings.

*Blooming* (Figure 7) is an example of the systematic approach I used to render shapes and color of this organic form. I used hard edges to concentrate on the shapes of different flower parts and an analogous color scheme for cohesiveness for this view, from beneath the petals, of an oversized flower in bloom.



Figure 7. *Blooming*, acrylic on canvas, 18''x14'', 2004.

Researching these artists exposed me to a multitude of approaches and solutions



in rendering organic forms, similar to my own. I have used a variety of these applications and techniques throughout my work.

### Working with Acrylics and Oils - Changing Like the Seasons

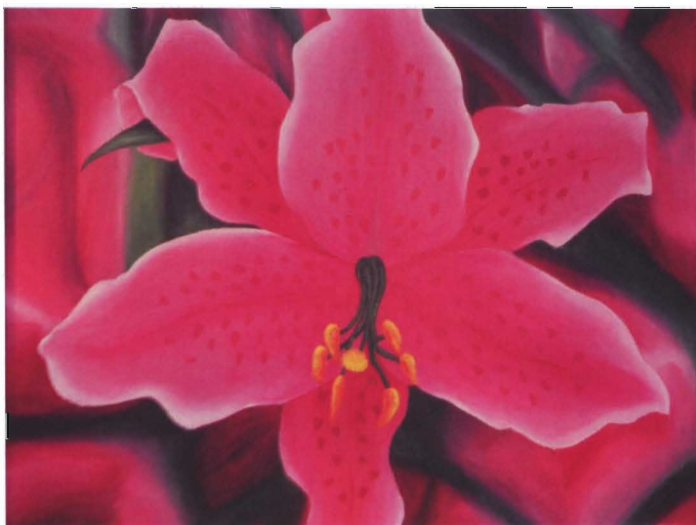


Figure 8. *Lily*, acrylic on canvas, 18"x22", 1999.

I took a naturalistic approach in my earlier acrylic works when rendering my subjects. For example, the brushstrokes in *Lily* (Figure 8) are very tight and colors well-blended. The size of the lily in the foreground dominates the

space and demands the viewer's attention. The background is blurred so the focus will remain on a single lily. *All a Buzz* (Figure 9) is covered with petals, leaves, and branches in an all-over patterning approach. However, each element is also rendered using techniques of realism. I included the bee to



Figure 9. *All a Buzz*, acrylic on canvas, 16"x18", 2003.

draw the viewer closer to see the delicate centers of the flowering azalea. My desire and need to be more expressive when applying paint to a surface led me in a new direction.

After exploring acrylics and looking at the works of van Gogh and Cezanne, I decided to work with oil paint sticks, which allowed me to work more loosely with my application of paint. Keeping loose strokes of paint is a challenge but allows a sense of freedom. This freedom permits me to be more expressive with color as I place strokes of paint on the canvas. I physically feel the form of the petals and leaves as the surface builds. In this medium, I incorporated a broken color approach. *Red Tulips* (Figure 10)

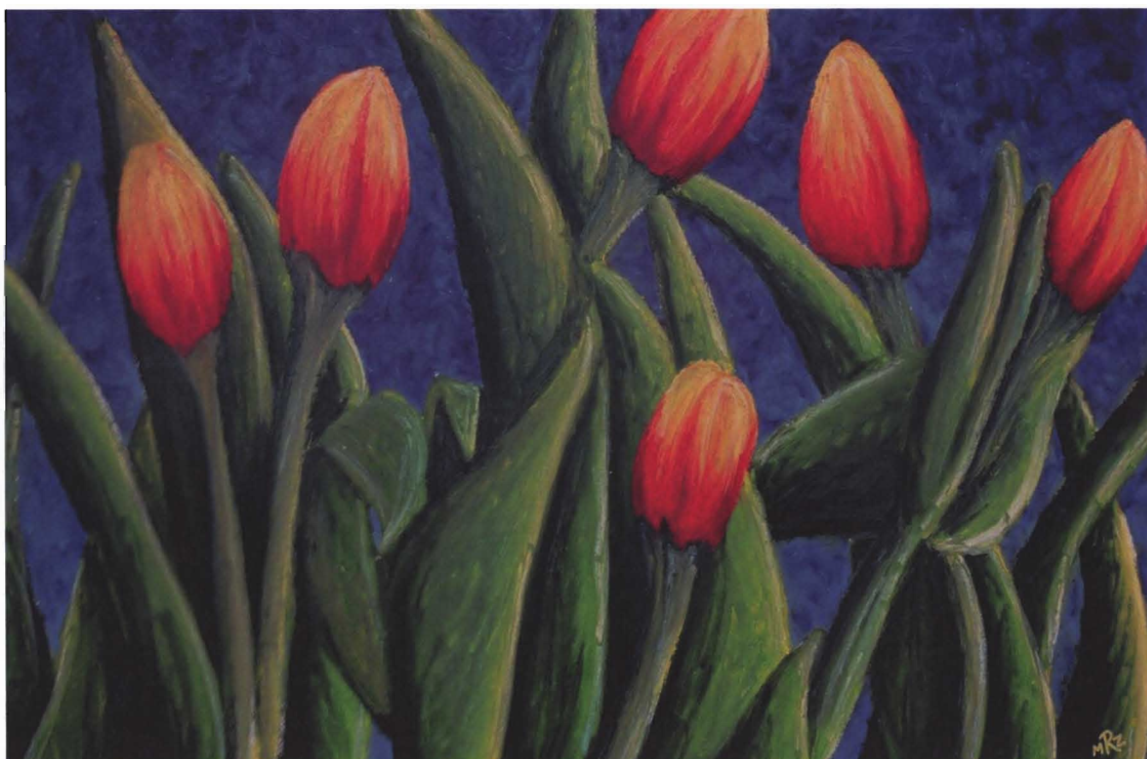


Figure 10. *Red Tulips*, oil paint sticks on paper, 24"x39.75", 2003.

is an example of how I utilized different strokes of paint in my application of colors to render form. My approach for using oil paint sticks is to allow each stroke of paint to

influence the next as the colors overlap. This has taught me to work with media as its features dictate its use.

Challenging myself once more to do something different led me to my most recent paintings. In *Shapes of Spring* (Figure 11), I used solid areas of color that were thinly outlined with varying hues. The center of the three panels is the stronghold for the painting. An aerial view of flowers with magenta petals, yellow-orange centers, and green leaves adorn this larger section. The outer panels display the underside of the flowers. Here, the colors of the petals, leaves, and stems are interchanged with the colors



Figure 11. *Shapes of Spring*, acrylic on canvas, 30''x52'', 2004

of the center panel. The magenta and orange colors of the flowers become the colors of leaves and stems. Traditional green leaves are now orange and magenta, and the petals are now green and orange. Blue is distributed to the outer panels from the center panel to



unify the three sections as one piece.

Organic shapes are simplified to a greater extent in the painting *Into Spring* (Figure 12). I extended this underside view of a flower over two panels. The simplified shapes of the petals, leaves, and stem allow a greater emphasis on the color itself.



Figure 12. *Into Spring*, acrylic on canvas, 18''x36'', 2004.

Secondary colors of different intensities are interchanged between the panels in order to balance the coloration of the total piece. The stretched out image, in addition to the interaction of colors, establishes my intent for these panels to work together as one.

### **Working with Clay**

My clay work reflects the same attention to nature as my paintings. Pressed leaves, masks, and shells are used to symbolize the things most important to me. I make clay pieces using a combination of hand-built methods, such as pinch, coil, and slab



techniques. *Intertwined* (Figure 13) represents my marriage. For this slab construction, I used impressions of leaves and plaster cast faces (with a tree bark texture) to tell of the



Figure 13. *Intertwined*, clay, 16"x12"x10", 2005.

Cohesiveness and inner connection that my husband and I share. Slab construction involves flattening clay with a roller. I then wrap the slabs of clay around prepared armatures or press the slab into plaster cast masks or shells. Once the clay is firm enough to hold its form, the armature is removed to prevent stress cracks as the clay dries.



Figure 14. *Flower Server*, clay, 2.5"x11"x11", 2005.

Scoring and slipping the backside of the cast clay pieces and the area of the clay structure, where they will be attached, ensures a secure fit.

*Flower Server* (Figure 14) is another clay piece, which has hand built flowers on slab constructed sections. The four quadrants are formed separately with a free-standing flower in the center to unify the pieces as one. This functional clay piece is adorned by a clay flower laid by its side purely for aesthetics.

*Tight Bond* (Figure 15) is an assemblage sculpture of my family. It is a

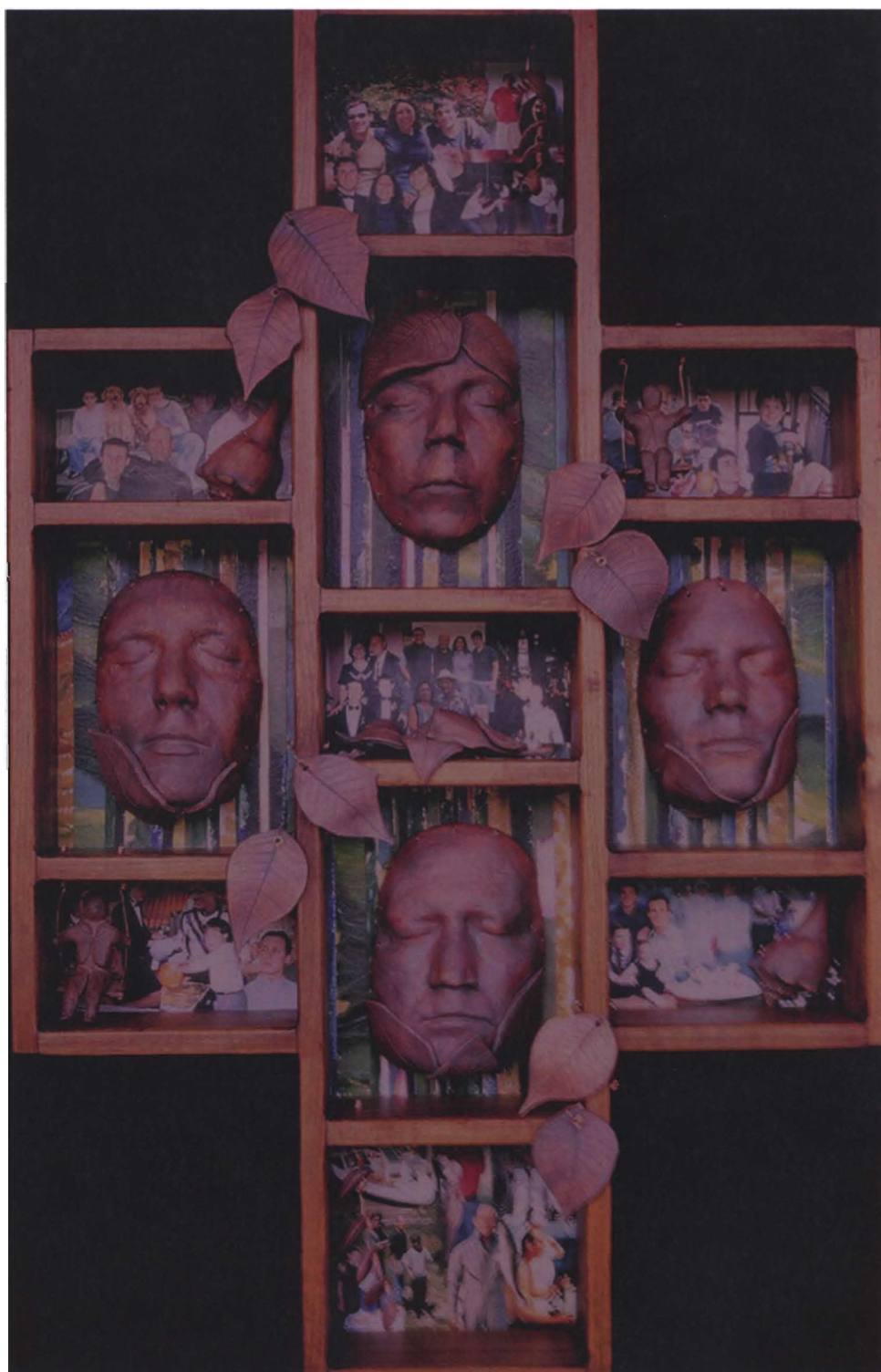


Figure 15. *Tight Bond*, mixed media, 38.5"x24"x3.5", 2006.

culmination of my previous ideas and techniques. Pressed clay leaves, plaster cast clay masks, shells, wood, wire, and paper tell of the people, places, and things that represent the strong relationship within my family. The element of time was my reasoning for using cast plaster molds of faces. In the blink of an eye, children grow into adults. Photographs and memories are all that remain of life's most precious moments. Placing strips of plaster gauze over each person's face allowed me to preserve a moment in time. Plaster molds of seashells were made by pressing the shells into small containers of plaster. Once the plaster sets, I removed the shells and pressed clay into the ready made molds. Allowing time for some of the clay's moisture to be absorbed in the plaster mold, the clay is carefully lifted and edges trimmed. Holes along the edges of the clay pieces were made prior to the bisque firing, so I would have a way to attach them to a wooden box. Iron oxide was applied to the clay surface before the high firing to give an earthy sense of existence. Trimmed edges from my oil paintings, old photographs, and transparencies of marriage and birth certificates were used to fill the back panels of each compartment of the wooden shadow box. Clay leaves, masks, and shells are attached to different sections by threading copper wire through the holes in the clay pieces and wooden box. This large piece is a complex record of my family's history, personal and straight from the heart.

Exploring the use of plaster cast items has enabled me to focus on the form and surface of the hand-built structure. The clay pieces from these castings are used to adorn and enhance the clay form. Natural forms that inspire and direct my thoughts and plans, as well as the various approaches to my work, are forever changing like the seasons.

## Conclusion

Even though this paper serves as the final element in earning my MIS, it feels like the beginning. So many ideas for new paintings and clay pieces are in the works, as I anxiously await time to spend in my studio. Many thanks are due to the faculty who directly or indirectly assisted me in achieving my degree. Much encouragement and direction from numerous instructors have made it possible. *Try something different, something new* are words that I have passed on to my students. The knowledge from not only my instructors but from other artist and art teachers in my classes was refreshing and informative. Much is to be learned, the resources endless. I plan to continue taking the off-campus classes to continue my growth as an artist and educator. They make me find time for my personal art work. It is so easy to get wrapped up in lesson plans, sample work, grading, meetings, the list goes on. Time in my studio allows me to express myself, which is important to me and has become an essential part of my well being as an educator and as an artist.



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## **Marguerite Zingraff Ratliff**

### **Education:**

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 2006 | Master of Interdisciplinary Studies, Painting and Ceramics<br>Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia |
| 1981 | Bachelor of Science, Elementary and Secondary Art<br>Education, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia         |

**Certification:** Art Education PreK-12, General Mathematics  
Collegiate Professional License

### **Teaching Experience:**

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| 1995-present | Art Teacher, Granby High School<br>Norfolk, Virginia                 |
| 1994-1995    | Preschool Teacher, Barefoot Kids,<br>Virginia Beach, Virginia        |
| 1989-1990    | Preschool Teacher, Great Bridge Child Care,<br>Chesapeake, Virginia  |
| 1981-1986    | Art and Woodshop Teacher, Friends School<br>Virginia Beach, Virginia |

### **Selected Related Experience:**

- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| 2003-present | Member, Art Curriculum Committee (K-12)<br>Norfolk Public Schools, Norfolk, Virginia  |
| 2003, 2006   | Cooperating Teacher, Granby High School<br>Norfolk, Virginia  |
| 2005         | Participant, International Baccalaureate Mid-Atlantic<br>Conference, Jeb Stuart High School,<br>Springfield, Virginia                     |
| 2004         | Participant, International Baccalaureate Conference<br>St. Petes, Florida   |
| 2004         | Instructor, Summer Enrichment, International<br>Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement Prep Course<br>Granby High School, Norfolk, Virginia |

**Selected Related Experience (cont.):**

2003	Participant, Courageous Leadership for School Success Conference, Sedona, Arizona
2003	Participant, Advanced Placement Studio Art Conference Deep Creek High School, Chesapeake, Virginia
2003	Participant, Teaching Strategies for Student Success Granby High School, Norfolk, Virginia
2002	Art Teacher, Summer Enrichment Program Granby High School, Norfolk, Virginia
1999-2002	Member, Youth Art Book Committee Norfolk Public Schools, Norfolk, Virginia
2001	Participant, International Baccalaureate Conference United World College, Montezuma, New Mexico
2000	Participant, Art & Life in Africa Workshop Hampton University, Hampton, Virginia
1999	Member, Art Textbook Committee Norfolk Public Schools, Norfolk, Virginia
1998-1999	Participant, Technology Academy, Granby High School, Norfolk, Virginia
1996	Participant, Advanced Placement Studio Art Norfolk, Virginia

**Memberships and Professional Organizations:**

1981-present	National Art Education Association and Tidewater Virginia Art Education Association
2006-present	Member, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia

**Exhibitions:**

2006	<i>Granby's First Annual Faculty and Staff Art Exhibit</i> , Granby High School, Norfolk, Virginia
2006	<i>Love of Nature</i> , Master of Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, ,Phillips Family Gallery, Virginia Beach, Virginia
1996-present	<i>Granby Gallery</i> , Annual Art Teachers and Art Students Exhibit, Granby High School, Norfolk, Virginia
2005	<i>Tidewater Virginia Art Education Association Juried Exhibit</i> , Hermitage Foundation Museum, Norfolk, Virginia
1997-1999	<i>Beyond the Chalkboard</i> , Annual Art Teachers Exhibit Crestar Bank, Norfolk, Virginia